

*The Paradox of Cultural Identity in English Canada*

Ian Angus  
Department of Humanities  
Simon Fraser University  
iangus@sfu.ca

Submitted to *Topia: A Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies* February 2003.  
Previously published in French translation in *Les Cahiers de recherche sociologique*.

## The Paradox of Cultural Identity in English Canada

While I was very pleased to receive the invitation from Jean-Phillipe Warren to write an essay for this special issue on “contemporary debates in Canada concerning national identity and cultural identity,” it immediately plunged me into a series of confusions.<sup>1</sup> “Debates in Canada,” in an email from Québec, I took to refer to debates in *English* Canada—especially since one of the features of my writing on this topic has been to accept the sociologically distinct features of the identities embroiled in the Canadian nations-state, investigate them in a manner mindful of the Imperial and, subsequently, national history that constituted their relationship, and probe their political possibilities based on their contemporary politics of identity. This is already to say too much, to lapse into a language misleading due to its easy universality. I cannot investigate other identities in the Canadian nations-state—or embroiled with it but perhaps not *in* it, like the First Nations—with the same understanding of lived history and emotional attachment as that of English Canada and, indeed, this is the only identity of the Canadian nations-state from which I can write as a participant, one for whom its destiny is also my own. I admit to a suspicion of any discussion of identity that is not reflexive in this sense, that is not about one’s own identity, since it would seem to slide into a classification of others eminently to be avoided.

### 1. The Genesis of a Confusion

I was thus asked to reflect upon my location in English Canada with regard to “national identity and cultural identity,” that is to say, on cultural identities *in* English Canada and the identity *of* English Canada itself. The difference between identities ‘in’ and ‘of’ English

Canada would become my undoing. This essay thus begins with an apology; it seeks to explain why I could not answer the question that Jean-Phillipe so kindly put to me.

I began by an initial classifying of debates about identity into three categories: sub-national identities, for which one may take the multiculturalism as the main exemplar; social movement identities, which English Canada shares with all other advanced capitalist societies, which have a problematic relationship to any national polity (bearing, as they do, the seeds of what has been called an ‘international civil society’); and a ‘national’ identity of English Canada which must be distinguished from the Ottawa axis of ‘Canadian’ identity. They can be provisionally schematized in this way.

What?	How constituted?	Where? (space)	When? (time)	Site	Actor
English-Canadian identity	English Canada’s new relations with Québec and First Nations	Canada outside Québec and in problematic relation to First Nations territory	Post-1988	No centre, by default goes to a plurality of provincial capitals	Citizens, but in a new relation to the Canadian nations-state
Sub-national identity; the example of multiculturalism	Politics of inclusion into national identity	Within the national territory	Post-1963 (Bilingualism and Biculturalism Commission )	Ethnic institutions	Ethno-cultural groups
New social movements	‘Particularist’ struggles against the dominant hegemony	Advanced capitalist societies <sup>2</sup>	Post-World War II	Movements and their networks	Social movement identities

But a problem emerged which broke down both the scheme and any attempt at such categorization: The sub-national identities and social movement identities couldn’t be placed *within* English Canada in any sense analogous to the sense in which they could be placed

within 'Canada.' Since English Canada is not an organized polity, but a fragment, it could not function as a container in the way that nation-states are normally assumed to function as a container for that which occurs 'inside' their borders. Then, it became apparent that the fact that the identity of English Canada is very rarely posed as a question was itself the main issue. Notable exceptions are Resnick (1994) and Angus (1997). Moreover, when it is posed as an issue, quite often the supposedly 'sub-national' identities come to stand for it: English Canada is often defined by its diversity, multiculturalism, etc. that are claimed to occur 'within' it.

This might help to explain the observation that the current situation of "contemporary debates in Canada concerning national identity and cultural identity" consists in a proliferation of identities stemming from these three sources whose relations are unfixed and therefore combine in new forms. They are unfixed because there is no hegemonic force—no longer 'Canada' not (yet?) 'English Canada'—capable of linking them under a single umbrella. Identities proliferate and enter into new relations in a moment of crisis when they are not fixed by a hegemonic force. Heated political and intellectual debates concerning cultural identity have become a sign of our times. Treatment of such issues requires, not only that one define identity and map the issues which it covers, but also a reflexive inquiry into the problematics of such definition and mapping, not only for the usual reasons of theoretical clarity, but also in order to address the contemporaneity of the concern with cultural identity.

The problem, and my confusion, had now fully emerged: Given that English Canada is not an identity articulated through a nation-state, it failed to anchor other identities as 'within' itself such that they often seemed to be the identity 'of' English Canada itself. The failure of the container metaphor, or more exactly its reversibility, became the defining

problem for English Canadian identity. The first word of my apology will thus have to explain this failure.

## 2. First Word: Slide and Container

‘English Canada’ is neither a nation-state nor a regional grouping with representative political institutions. Its cultural identity tends to disappear as an object of analysis. Questions of the identity of English Canada have tended to aim either ‘above’ at ‘Canada’ or ‘below’ toward a sub-national identity such as region, province, city, etc. or ‘outside’ toward a non-national identity such as feminism or other gender-based identities, environmentalism or other social movement-based identities, etc. English Canada has only a minor degree of consciousness of itself which has arisen recently in relation to the self-assertive politics of Québec and First Nations. Even the name *English Canada* is problematic: the rest of Canada, Canada without Québec, and other circumlocutions, register this difficulty. Given that the name does not refer to the origins of its citizens considered individually, but to the language of everyday interaction and the institutional consequences of this dominance, the name seems appropriate. It also has the advantage of pointing to the fact that the origin of this dominance is not, as some apologists would have it, in ordinary convenience, but in the legacy of the British Empire. Thus, if one can speak of the cultural identity of English Canada, one must keep in mind that it is an identity that has expressed itself mainly through an identification with *Canada* as such – thus often rendering invisible the question of its relations to Québec and First Nations. Using a linguistic term, the *slide* between English Canada and Canada covers a conceptual confusion that was a historically effective structuring factor in English Canadian identity. English Canadians took themselves to be simply Canadians outright, thereby hiding the fact that it is the only cultural identity that has

not been included into Canada by conquest or treaty. That is to say, the slide operates to obscure the legacy of empire within the Canadian nations-state.

But the problem has an even deeper dimension. To the extent that the cultural identity of English Canada is unaware of itself, lacking self-interpretation, and thus lacking the form of existence of a cultural identity, it is problematic to what extent we can consider other cultural identities as existing *within* English Canada. If an overarching hegemonic identity were fixed, then the hegemonized elements could well be regarded as within it, but to the extent that the (apparently) 'higher' identity is tenuous and unsettled, the so-called 'elements' might be better regarded as 'higher' and the identity 'English Canada' itself might be considered a fragment. It is unclear which identity is the container, or context, and which the content, or hegemonized. This general situation generates a reciprocal definition of identity that I call 'constitutive paradox.' Constitutive paradox occurs whenever there is an absence of hierarchical relation between two identities, but yet they are not simply different, so that they become mutually definitional such that, alternatively, each can become content for the other as context, or container.

Prior to the hegemonic crisis which has instituted a constitutive paradox for cultural identity an/of English Canada, the slide between Canada and English Canada kept sub-national and a-national identities under the hegemonic fixture of the nation-state. Such fixture allows cultural identities to appear natural and therefore unproblematic. The second word of my apology will thus have to be an account of the 'mode of existence' of cultural identities such that their fixture often predominates through largely stable historical periods but come into crisis as they end.

### **3. Second Word: Fixture and Crisis**

One may define a personal identity, or a ‘self,’ as a situated, embodied, reflexivity. Such situated reflexivity is the condition for being able to “reflect on (or: love, desire, hate, be disgusted with, be pleased with, remind, correct, etc.) myself” (Zaner 1981, 151). A self is self-interpreting. By extension any “higher-order persons,” to use Edmund Husserl’s phrase, are similarly self-interpreting (Husserl 1969, 132).<sup>3</sup> The more conventional terminology of “social groups” is misleading here, since it assumes, consistent with a pervasive ontological and/or methodological individualism, that such groups are composed from human individuals, can be dissolved into them, and therefore can be investigated as an aggregate. In order to investigate ‘cultural identities’ (as they are more adequately termed) one must respect the specific activities through which such identities are constituted as such without reducing them to identities of another, ‘lower,’ level such as personal identities. Cultural identities are thus unities, or totalities, whose specific character is destroyed if they are dissolved into their purported components (human individuals) or, for that matter, unified into a ‘higher-level’ composite. The investigation of the specific character of cultural identities thus opens the possibility of investigating the manifold and overlapping dimensions of the social world.

A situated reflexivity gathers its various components neither randomly nor as a mere aggregate but rather through an emphasis—or, conversely, disavowal—of some components over others. Thus some components of the identity are regarded as crucial, others as more peripheral, others as regrettable, etc. Such modes of self-interpretation may be called *salience*. It is through salience that some components of an identity become badges, or signs, of the identity itself. These signs register the difference of a given identity within the current field of identities. Reflexivity always has this double-sidedness: the inter-relationship of self-interpretation and interpretation of others situates an actor in the social world. The indefinite

plurality of the interaction of social identities requires that it be conceptualized as a 'politics of identity' rather than in Hegelian terms as a 'politics of recognition' such as is proposed by Charles Taylor, which leads to conceptualizing the field of identities as a straightforward duality of 'denial and counter-denial' (Taylor 1993, 197; for a critique of Hegelian assumptions in the politics of identity see Angus 2000b, 64-6). A Hegelian phrasing assumes the duality of the 'dialectic of self-consciousness' and is thus insufficient to grasp the indefinite plurality of the contemporary field and will likely slide toward the consideration of only 'official' identities.

Self-interpretation of a situated self, whether personal or 'higher-order,' involves action as a necessary and constituent element. The investigation of cultural identities is not primarily about the 'beliefs' that individuals claim to hold when asked but about the activities that the cultural identity undertakes that constitute it as such and which are the basis for self-interpretation. For example, an ethnic cultural identity involves participation in key activities such as festivals, religious (or originally religious) holidays, sacrifices, etc. without which the cultural identity does not exist. Reflection upon these activities by poets, teachers, artists, and cultural workers of all kinds is the self-interpretation that binds the cultural identity into a unity. The media of communication in which these activities and reflexions are embodied constitutes the materiality of the self-expression of a cultural identity (Angus 2000b, Part 1; Angus 1997, chapter 3). Cultural identity depends upon a degree of reflexive 'consciousness of itself,' understood in this concrete manner, which can be either strengthened or weakened depending on its relationships with other cultural identities that overlap or compete. In this sense, cultural identity occurs within an ongoing, socially-constitutive, agonistic, rhetorical field.

Cultural identities are articulated by cultural workers in expressions that intervene in the current configuration of the social world and project it forward into a new situation initiating a complex cultural politics of representation: first, *which* identities are represented (and which are marginalized or absent); second, *where* they are represented—whether on a powerful social medium like television or in a coffee-shop or around a kitchen table; third, *how* they are represented—which cognitive, perceptual and social characteristics the medium emphasizes and which it fails to capture; fourth, which characteristics of the cultural identity have been selected as salient and in what way they have been characterized, which also includes the question of *who* represents whom; and fifth, perhaps summing up all the rest, *why* the representation in question has the social impact that it has. While such expressions are often called representations, it would be a misunderstanding to regard them as simply referring to pre-existing identities. For this reason, the term ‘articulation’ is often thought more adequate (Angus 2000a, 62-87). Activities that express, form and promote cultural identities clearly pertain to the constitution of these identities as such both internally and in their impact on the social world. A key question for cultural politics is thus understanding the field of cultural identities in its plurality and historical dynamism. Any investigation of a given identity needs to consider the relationship between a given cultural identity as it has been formed within a prior configuration, its self-constitution through expressions, the change of its identity through such expressions, and, further, its impact upon the subsequent field of cultural identities.

Considering an identity within the field of differences that defines the reciprocal relations of identities implies that an identity is not merely internal—what is nowadays called an ‘essentialist’ conception—but is formed as what it is in these reciprocal relations.<sup>4</sup> Within any historical period, the reciprocal relations of identities are relatively stable. Or, to put it in

terms of theoretical priority: a historical period is constituted by the relative stability of the reciprocal relations between identities. Such a *fixing* of relations of difference can be traced to the institutional arrangements which provide a stability among relations of identity beyond the time-span of individuals. Analytically, therefore, institutional shifts are the key to historical periodization even though they are often prefigured by social movements which press the identity-formations to their limits. Periods of historical crisis and change are characterized by the *unfixing* of relations of identity such that they are cut loose, or float, until a new fixing arrives. Within such a crisis identities proliferate and enter into new relations. English Canada is currently undergoing such a crisis in which there is a proliferation of unfixed identities. If this event of deconstruction, unbuilding, can be located historically, it should suggest what current configurations herald for a future politics of identity.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps the apology ends here. With this preparation, and its massaging of Jean-Phillipe's question, I can address the discourse of cultural identity of English Canada on the background of its historical fixture with an aim to defining its contemporary crisis that produces a proliferation of identities without a definitive hierarchical relation.

#### **4. The Paradox of Cultural Identity in English Canada**

Every cultural identity normally refers to itself and to the hegemonic force of identity that reigns. A hegemonic identity defines a universal that fixes the place of particular identities. Thus is defined the relation between container and contained, context and content, universal and particular. Ethno-cultural identities are minority identities 'within' Canada, one may say in this spirit. In times of crisis, in which there is an unfixing, or unbuilding, this unproblematic relation between particular and universal becomes unsettled. Thus, identities proliferate and enter into new relationships without becoming fixed. The

relation between container and contained, context and content, universal and particular is no longer determined.

The cultural identity of English Canada has always been problematic, either in the form in which it was passed over in the slide toward Canada or in the contemporary form in which it is ceded no significant place in the neo-liberal global hegemony. If, despite this evanescence, we pose the question of the relation between English Canada and sub-national identities and social movement identities, then English Canada cannot be assumed as a hegemonic formation and thereby conceived as a container, or context, for these other identities. What English Canada is, or will be, depends in large part on how its relations with these identities might be settled (as well as with the 'external' ones of Québec and First Nations). The identity of English Canada itself must be held as problematic, questionable, in the same moment that the question of the other identities is raised.

In place of a container-contained, context-content, relation we must therefore conceptualize them as mutually referring: Either might be the container for the other depending on the aspect of the question that is thematized. For example, a more equitable distribution of wealth and power between ethno-cultural groups, or a recognition of the important role of social movement identities in the public realm, might legitimize an overarching English Canadian identity. In coming to define the content of English Canadian identity, these others become its container, or context. If an English Canadian identity could emerge to negotiate a viable space with Québec and First Nations, and against neo-liberal globalization, then it could serve to protect and develop ethno-cultural and social movement identities. It would become the container for these other contents. In a moment of crisis, the relation goes both ways. It becomes paradoxical.

To give a formal definition: Lacking hegemonic fixture, an identity oscillates paradoxically between being simply a particular identity and being a candidate for content of the universal, hegemonic identity. Its condition of emergence is that an identity is constitutively paradoxical when it cannot be definitively located within a hegemonic fixture of the field of identities. 'Lower' and 'higher' identities can switch places. A particular identity and its purportedly universal hegemonic formation can only be defined reciprocally and the definition cannot establish in a prior manner which must be assumed in order to provide the definition for the other. Thus, it is a matter of arriving at the starting-point for analysis rather than proceeding from an established foundation.

My argument is that English Canadian identity is constitutively paradoxical insofar as its existence depends upon the identities that purportedly comprise it, not as providing the content for a pre-existing container, but for the very existence of the identity of English Canada itself. This means that the identity of English Canada only comes into existence through a political project that would wrest it free of both its submergence into Canada and of its dissolution. While the language of fate lends itself to the form of a lament, the language of a political project is self-creation and political will. Its danger is not the defeatism of historical necessity, but a false optimism of the will that would make all projects seem viable. Avoiding this danger requires that the political project be rooted in the historical formation of a people such that through self-creation it confronts its origin in what it has been made. Fate is thus fashioned into destiny, which releases a joy of self-knowing in self-making, but, having cut loose from necessity, remains without guarantee.<sup>6</sup> In such a way English Canada might assume its identity by going forward to meet its origin in its transformation to confront new circumstances. This project depends upon a revealing of the past that has its peculiar difficulty in the failure of English Canada to achieve hegemonic

fixity. One suspects that the constitutive paradox that this failure bequeaths to questions of identity in/of English Canada reveals a dimension of identity that emerges whenever hegemonies are unsettled.

## **5. The Discourse of the Cultural Identity of English Canada**

The contemporary proliferation of a politics of cultural identities in English Canada should be understood against the background of the cultural nationalism that preceded it. As in Québec, the question of the cultural identity of English Canada has been posed by intellectuals in dialogue with the aspiration for national independence—though of course the nations in question are problematically related (Angus 1997, chapter 2; Leroux 2001).<sup>7</sup> While this has given rise to many academic studies in different fields, the discourse of the cultural identity of English Canada itself cannot be located within any one of these fields as such. Instead, there has been an interdisciplinary discourse across the social sciences and humanities oriented to the cultural identity of English Canada and its constituent groups. Arguably, it is one of the main thematics which has resisted the reduction of broad intellectual inquiry with public significance to specialized studies which has been, nevertheless, the main tendency deriving from university disciplinary organization.

Cultural nationalism dominated cultural politics during the period when an independent Canadian polity appeared to be a possibility and was pursued in a Left-nationalist politics. This period began with the breakdown of the post-War consensus on the American Empire, which is roughly contemporaneous with the rise of the New Left internationally. Perhaps we can set as an inaugural date the election of the Pearson government in 1963 in which the Canadian nationalist politics of Diefenbaker was routed from government never to return. Establishment nationalism then abated; nationalism migrated to the left of the spectrum and

remained in opposition. Its final moment was in the coalition that opposed the Free Trade Agreement in 1988. During 1963-1988, Left-nationalism housed the most influential counter-hegemonic identity politics in English Canada. It is this period that produced a rich discourse on the distinctive cultural identity of English Canada.

My purpose in this short essay cannot be to discuss thoroughly the manifold issues involved in the cultural identity of English Canada. Rather, I want to define the 'discourse' of the cultural identity of English Canada. That is to say, I want to show the main lineaments that made it possible to discuss the cultural identity as such and by what parameters such a discussion is limited. Because a cultural identity is not a natural fact it comes into existence in tandem with some awareness of its existence. This perceived existence is not uni-dimensional or commanding, at least in modern societies where there is some form of civil society distinct from the state, but rather constructs a certain 'space' which allows for disagreements and debates. This space for disagreement is not simply random but structured in a way which also defines the limit of the discourse, the point at which it is stretched to such an extent that it either disappears or is altered into something entirely different. I will approach the definition of this discourse through an analysis of the main theoretical theses about the specific and distinct cultural identity of English Canada during the period of cultural nationalism.

I think that it can, without too great a simplification, be asserted that there are four main theoretical theses in English Canadian social science that pertain to the specific and distinct cultural identity of English Canada. These are theses oriented to accounting for the historical cultural formation itself primarily with regard to its economic, social and political dimensions.<sup>8</sup> These four theses are known as dependency political economy, the Red Tory, the vertical mosaic, and that of communication.

Dependency political economy is mainly associated with the work of Harold Innis. It pointed out that Canadian political economy was strongly marked by two factors that are either absent or much less important in other countries, especially those in which most economic theory is developed: the imperial connection and resource extraction. Canada has been a colony of the successive empires of France, Britain and the United States. In Innis' words,

To an important extent the emphasis has been on the development of an east-west system with particular reference to exports of wheat and other agricultural products to Great Britain and Europe. However, since the turn of the century, the United States has had an increasing influence on this structure. ... American imperialism has replaced and exploited British imperialism (Innis 1979, 395).

Economic development has thus been not primarily for national purposes but for the wealth and power of the empire. It consisted in extraction of resources, their export in raw fashion to the imperial centre, and the import of manufactured goods from the centre. This means that the main relations of power are between the centre and the periphery. It has also had the consequence that a strong central state oversaw development and provided its necessary infrastructure (especially canals, roads, railways, telecommunications, etc.). The different regions of Canada are marked by the different resources extracted and the infrastructure that accommodated extraction. The strong central state thus took on the additional role of articulating a national policy that pulled the regions together even though it did so under the dominant interests of central Canada. The national state was thus a key factor in the very existence of Canada and its capacity to resist the regionalizing pull of integration into the larger political economy of the United States.

The Red Tory thesis was developed by Gad Horowitz in his analysis of Canadian labour-socialist politics and the exemplary significance of the philosophy of George Grant.

Horowitz argued that “the relative strength of socialism is related to the relative strength of toryism” because of the communitarian ethic of both in distinction from the individualist ethic of liberalism which predominates in the United States (Horowitz 1972, 2). Canadian distinctness lies in the vibrancy of the concept of community in its political culture.

Horowitz was aware that his thesis buttressed the Innisian economic explanation for an interventionist state. “Of course it was [economically] ‘necessary’ to make use of the state in Canada. The question is: why did this necessity not produce ideological strain?” (Horowitz 1972, 11). This communitarian component has the consequence that Canadian society is more tolerant, since it accepts greater ideological diversity, and is more inclined to address social issues through state action—which even affects Canadian liberalism (Horowitz 1972, 17, 10, 29). The philosophical epitome of this communitarian emphasis might well be George Grant’s commitment to tradition and the conservation of Canadian particularity, on the one hand, combined with a thoroughgoing moral egalitarianism, on the other.

While the slide between English Canada and Canada is apparent in the emphasis on Ottawa and Federal policy in dependency theory, the thesis of the Red Tory may seem to pertain simply to English Canada. Note, however, Horowitz’ phrasing.

In Canada the centre party emerged triumphant over its enemies on the right and the left. Here, then, is another aspect of English Canada’s uniqueness: it is the only society in which Liberal Reform faces the challenge of socialism *and* emerges victorious. The English Canadian fragment *is* bourgeois. The toryism and the socialism are ‘*touches*’ (Horowitz 1972, 40).

First, the success of the Liberal party is analyzed through the Red Tory thesis concerning the survival of socialist and tory touches. Second, this is proposed to define the uniqueness of English Canada. But, Liberal success must surely make reference to the considerable number of Federal parliamentary representatives from Québec and explain their ideological attractiveness to voters. Moreover, it needs to either apply the Red Tory analysis to Québec also or pose the question of the ‘external’ influence of Québec’s ideological formation on English Canada. This blindness indicates that the slide is at work. It consists in a congenital and determinate indecisiveness with regard to the object of analysis: Canada or English Canada?

The definition of Canada as a ‘vertical mosaic’ was developed by sociologist John Porter in the 1960’s at roughly the same time as the Red Tory thesis emerged. The title of his study *The Vertical Mosaic* was initially intended as the title of a chapter dealing with the relationship between ethnicity and social class. “As the study proceeded, however, the hierarchical relationship between Canada’s many cultural groups became a recurring theme in class and power” (Porter 1965, xiii). Porter presented detailed studies of interlocking elites which were imbedded with cultural groups in complex ways. The dominant British elite, for example, was often resented by French Canadians and newer minority groups. Nevertheless, “the elites of French Canada have worked with the British to create the kind of society that Quebec is” (Porter 1965, 92). Canadian studies of social power have tended to focus on this “recurring theme” of the relationship between ethnicity and social class until the present day.

The term ‘mosaic’ was immediately appropriated in official papers, and both utilized and criticized in academic discussions, of multiculturalism. While there was, of course, no lack of celebratory literature, it was often argued that no genuine mosaic, or multiculturalism, obtained due to class inequality, state regulation, or racial prejudice. This point was worth

making in its own terms, however it was often overlooked that these were not opposed terms in Porter's analysis but mutually reinforcing ones in which "speculatively, it might be said that the idea of an ethnic mosaic, rather than the idea of the melting pot, impedes the processes of social mobility" (Porter 1965, 70). The mosaic-character of multiculturalism, which distinguishes Canada from the United States, tends to be interpreted as a proposed utopia, in order to be denied that status, when for Porter it was a term directly linked to the 'verticality' of class and elite power. It has been characteristic of debates about the specific and distinct cultural identity of English Canada, in a second slide, to confuse the definition of distinctness with the proposal of an intended, or even achieved, social goal. It may well be that we should promote our distinctiveness, though this does not follow automatically, and it may well be suspected that whatever distinctiveness the English Canadian cultural identity has it will, like any other identities, contain its specific dangers as well as goals. Porter himself argued in liberal individualist fashion that "the organization of society on the basis of rights that derive from group membership is sharply opposed to the concept of a society based on citizenship, which has been such an important aspect in the development of modern societies ... Citizenship rights are essentially universalistic whereas group rights are essentially particularistic (Porter 1975, 297-8). In this key case, which tests the limits of the discourse of cultural identity, distinctiveness was analyzed as a defect rather than an advantage. This is possible only through analyzing identity in strictly 'sociological' terms, that is to say, as an empirical fact and abstracting from the procedures of identification which turn such facts into cultural politics.<sup>9</sup> During the contemporary event of deconstruction, unbuilding, of Canada we will no longer be able to indulge in the slide between distinctiveness and the 'good' any more than we will be able to assume that English Canada stands for Canada outright.

The theme of communication as defining the specific and distinct cultural identity of English Canada is of more recent origin. Though perhaps implicit in Harold Innis' late works dealing with communication, these works themselves did not address Canada directly and emerged only peripherally in the work of Marshall McLuhan, who followed up Innis' communication studies. Recently, however, it has become increasingly popular, and persuasive, to see the later focus on communication as continuing Innis' early political-economic studies and as indicating a distinct feature of Canadian history itself. Innis was not just concerned with transportation of goods but with the way in which communication media structured relations of space and time and thus the perception and thought of those within a given media complex. It has been argued that this concern derives from "a Canadian context that initially generated interest in the transformation and breakdown of empires and the emergence of nation states" (Patterson 1990, 205). McLuhan generalized this insight into a theory of foreground-background, or explicit-implicit, relations. "Like Innis, McLuhan mistrusted the classification of new data in conformity with old categories. This he held blocked new perception (Patterson 1990, 178). Understood in this way, communication is concerned with the construction of dominant manners of perceiving and the conditions under which such dominant manners come into crisis and alter. Its orientation is toward the difficult perception of the new as new. In McLuhan's words,

Borderlines, as such, are a form of political 'ecumenism,' the meeting place of diverse worlds and conditions. ... Canada is a land of multiple borderlines, of which Canadians have probed very few. These multiple borderlines constitute a low-profile identity, since, like the territory, they have to cover a lot of ground. ... The borderline is an area of spiraling repetition and replay, both of inputs and feedback, both of interlace and interface, an area of

‘double ends joined,’ of rebirth and metamorphosis (McLuhan and Powers 1989, 164-5).

McLuhan’s articulation of the communication theory pushes to the limit, as does Porter’s negative evaluation of ethnicity, the discourse of English Canadian cultural identity itself. (English) Canadian distinctiveness comes to serve solely as a well of escapism or nostalgia for American tourists. “If a U.S. citizen so chose, Canada could become an enormous psychic theme park; something like a Hollywood set that simultaneously links the past with the present, the city with the wilderness” (McLuhan and Mowers 1989, 148). Even in this descriptive context, I can’t fail to point out that the source for this reductionism is McLuhan’s unjustified application of the American figure of the frontier to Canada (p. 167) and thereby the confusion of a border with a frontier (Angus 1997, 128-30).

Even this short survey should serve to indicate several key themes in the four theses concerning the distinctiveness of (English) Canada: 1] empire, power, dominant modes of perception and thought, 2] transportation, communication, construction of new modes of perception and thought, and 3] community, ethnicity, and forms of collective action especially through the national state. These themes are thus better seen as mutually reinforcing, rather than exclusive, and have served to define a discursive space within which recent debates about the pertain to the specific and distinct cultural identity of English Canada have taken place. This discursive space can be defined through a double slide: between English Canada and Canada and between distinctiveness and the good. It is sufficient indication that this discourse has come to its historical closure that these two slides are no longer possible. They were prefigured by the limits of the discourse itself during the period of its dominance. Porter’s liberal individualist rejection of ethnicity and

communitarianism and McLuhan's interpretation of distinctiveness as entertainment show that the accounts of English Canadian distinctiveness simply assumed that such distinctiveness was a positive good to be protected and expanded. In the age of globalization, such an assumption is no longer possible.

## 6. English Canadian Identity in a Globalizing Era

The history of the debates concerning identity in English Canada betrays an increasing awareness of these limit-issues in the way that the relation between identity and difference has been formulated. Left-nationalism argued for the difference of Canada from the United States and built upon this a politics of independent socialism. Its main target was the liberal continentalism that assimilated Canada to the American Empire. Since difference was in this view external, internally there could be only identity: regional, linguistic, gender, etc. differences within Canada (not only *English* Canada) were regarded as unimportant by contrast.<sup>10</sup> Identity was considered unproblematic, simply a statement of history; it was considered as a modality of Being. Its swan song was in the coalition opposing Free Trade in the national election of 1988 in which a large plurality of gender-based identities, social movement identities, ethnic identities, and regional identities were hooked into a significant counter-hegemonic coalition in which being Canadian was linked to social programs, government intervention in the economy, and social justice—if not directly to socialism itself. Since then, these other identities have floated loose, as it were, and no longer sit in any determined relation to each other.

The post-Free Trade coalition era did not, however, signal an immediate end to the notion that cultural identities have the solidity of Being. The purported solidity was transferred to the plural identities outside the coalition. Thus began a period of warring

identities, such war being seen as necessary since the different plural identities just *were* different. The end of this era began as mobilization against the victorious neo-liberal free trade agenda began. Feminists, community activists, trade unionists, etc. began to seek their commonalities and, as a consequence, began to see their differences as positive differences of emphasis in constructing a plural and yet unified community. Identity in difference came into being as a new alternative coalition emerged. This coalition has both sub-national, national and international components. It amounts to a political demonstration of the theoretical truth that no one simply *is* an identity. The role of action in creating, sustaining and dissolving identities has come increasingly to the fore. Let us date this emerging period from the international demonstration against the World Trade Association in Seattle in November 1999 due to its significance for politicizing the neo-liberal world-order, though it might be dated within English Canada by the coalition in Ontario against Harris. Such coalitions are important in Ontario, Alberta and British Columbia but they have not yet had the impact necessary to regard them as indicating a historical shift. Since this is an emerging phenomenon, it is difficult to date definitively, though it would be difficult to deny that these new coalitions against neo-liberal globalization have not already begun their difficult emergence.

We may thus separate recent cultural politics in English Canada into three periods: 1] 1963-1988: A politics of Being, of a cultural identity of English Canada assumed as given and unalterable under the counter-hegemonic leadership of Left-nationalism; 2] 1988-1999: A continuation of the politics of Being without an overarching counter-hegemonic identity and project and thus as a field of conflict; 3] 1999-?: A politics of identity in difference, of diverse community opposition to neo-liberal free trade hegemony. The inherited imperial slide between English Canada and Canada continued to affect Left-nationalism even while new

attitudes to Québec and First Nations were emerging. They did not yet have sufficient force to affect self-definition such that the existence of English Canada as a cultural identity in its own right could be recognized. Such recognition was no more forthcoming in the second period, since the plurality of identities within English Canada looked no more to Ottawa than to itself for 'fixing.' In the emerging third period, a self-consciousness of English Canada is coming into existence both in relation to Québec and First Nations within the Canadian Confederation<sup>11</sup> and in relation to globalization. The difficult emergence of English Canada as a self-conscious cultural identity depends upon the event of deconstruction, unbuilding, of Confederation due to both internal and external factors. To the extent that this weakening is simply denied, the identity will be denied also: the slide is still somewhat effective. To the extent that it is simply embraced, without consciousness of the historical fear of being absorbed into the USA or of the loss of the hard-won advantages of Canadian citizenship in the face of the global market, the identity will be denied also, in favour of identification with a super-Canadian entity: the lure of empire. The very idea of a self-conscious cultural identity in English Canada is precarious and can only be developed, and/or sustained, within the emerging period insofar as the legacy of Left-nationalism can be both preserved and transformed to address critically the forces of globalization.

The disappearance of the second slide sets forth a major characteristic of the agenda for this emerging period. If distinctiveness was taken to be a 'good worth preserving and extending' without explicit inquiry, the age of globalization has removed from us this short-cut. The argument for 'the world we want' can no longer be made by showing that it contradicts the historical formation of English Canadian identity. It must be shown also that this identity contains elements of the good life. In this sense, one may say that cultural nationalism attempted a short-cut that avoided political philosophy in the public domain.

The historical discourse of the specific and distinct cultural identity of English Canada contains a suspicion of empire, a defence of community, and a concern with the conditions for perception of the new as new. The task is to forge continuity by showing how this inheritance can be renewed in the global opposition to neo-liberal globalization. Such an inheritance might become a gift, were we to meet our destiny in articulating it as a component of the good life for humans without restriction.

## Bibliography

- Angus, Ian. 1977. *A Border Within: National Identity, Cultural Plurality, and Wilderness*. Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's Press.
- Angus, Ian. 2000a. *(Dis)figurations: Discourse/Critique/Ethics*. London and New York: Verso.
- Angus, Ian. 2000b. *Primal Scenes of Communication: Communication, Consumerism and Social Movements*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Armour, Leslie and Trott, Elizabeth. 1981. *The Faces of Reason: An Essay on Philosophy and Culture in English Canada, 1850-1950*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press.
- Frye, Northrup. 1971. "Conclusion to *A Literary History of Canada*" in *The Bush Garden*. Toronto: Anansi.
- Horowitz, Gad. 1972. *Canadian Labour in Politics*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Innis, Harold. 1979. "Great Britain, the United States and Canada" in *Essays in Canadian Economic History*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Leroux, Robert. 2001. "'La Nation' and the Quebec Sociological Tradition (1890-1980)" in *The Canadian Journal of Sociology/Cahiers canadiens de sociologie*, 26(3).
- Heidegger, Martin. 1996. *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Heidegger, Martin. 1977. "The Question Concerning Technology" in *The Question Concerning Technology and other essays*, trans. William Lovitt. New York: Harper and Row.
- Husserl, Edmund. 1969. *Cartesian Meditations*, trans. Dorion Cairns. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.
- Kymlicka, Will. 1996. "Three Forms of Group-Differentiated Citizenship in Canada" in Seyla Benhabib (ed.), *Democracy and Difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

- McLuhan, Marshall and Powers, Bruce R. 1989. *The Global Village*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Patterson, Graeme. 1990. *History and Communications*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Porter, John. 1975. "Ethnic Pluralism in Canada" in Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan (eds.) *Ethnicity: Theory and Experience*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Porter, John. 1965. *The Vertical Mosaic*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Resnick, Philip (with a reply by Daniel Latouche), 1990. *Letters to a Québécois Friend*. Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's Press.
- Resnick, Philip. 1994. *Thinking English Canada*. Toronto: Stoddart.
- Taylor, Charles. 1993. "Impediments to a Canadian Future" in *Reconciling the Solitudes*. Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's Press.
- Zaner, Richard. 1981. *The Context of Self*. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press.

## Footnotes:

---

<sup>1</sup> This essay was written at the invitation of Jean-Phillipe Warren for a special issue of *Les Cahiers de recherche sociologique* on English Canadian sociology and has appeared there in French translation. I would like to thank the SSHRC who, through grant number 410-2002-1693, has supported the research upon which this essay is based.

<sup>2</sup> I define the comparability of new social movements in English Canada to those within other advanced capitalist societies in order to leave open the question of the relationship between these movements and those from other social forms in the so-called ‘South.’ I would not want to prejudge this complex issue, although perhaps my reduced axis of comparison does not avoid doing so. It is likely that under conditions of globalization the relations between these movements indicate similar struggles against a purely market-based social form and for this reason should be considered in relation to global examples of social movements.

<sup>3</sup> Cairns translates *Personalitäten höherer Ordnung* slightly misleadingly as “higher-level personalities” insofar as, in ordinary English, it emphasizes the difference of one personality from another. “Higher-order persons,” which I have used, corresponds more directly to Husserl’s meaning of the ‘person-character’ of such social unities. It does follow, however, from their ‘person-character’ that such characters are different and thus analogous to ‘personalities’ (see Angus 2000b, 69-72).

<sup>4</sup> My formulation here is more cautious than most current expressions of this point. The rejection of essentialism is often taken to imply that there is no internal ‘essence’ or identity at all—that, in its entirety, an identity is constructed from the field of differences. Two points in favour of my more cautious formulation may be noted here: 1] From the observation that differences construct an identity such that it would not be the same within a

---

different field of differences it does not follow that the field is the only factor in constituting an identity. 2] If it were the case that an identity is constructed entirely from the field, the inside-outside dynamic that is the core of studies of identity would be evaporated in favour of a pure outside. It may be argued, correctly in my view, that an inside is the product of a previous outside. Nevertheless, in the context of any given field of differences in a temporal continuum, it functions as an inside. Thus, its character as a product is only visible in reflection; it is experienced as an immediacy. To fail to retain an inside, even as the residue of a previous outside, would be to relapse into a purely structural determinism which annihilates the historical core of the problematic of cultural identities. It may be noted that historical analysis and periodization is central to my presentation in this essay, whereas it is rare in most contemporary investigations of cultural identities. My emphasis on the history of cultural transformation follows from this theoretical point. So does my emphasis on ‘particularity,’ ‘one’s own,’ or ‘authenticity’—terms that have almost disappeared from contemporary cultural critique. See the reconceptualization of ‘immediacy’ in these terms in Angus 2000a, 54-7, 67-8.

<sup>5</sup> It would be out of place here to discuss in detail the history of the terms unbuilding, destruction, deconstruction (*Abbau, Destruktion, déconstruction*) at the emerge in the history of phenomenology with Husserl, Heidegger and Derrida. Suffice it to mention only that this problematic emerges from the ‘turning-back’ of thought—retrogression, *Rückgang* (Husserl), step back, *Schritt zurück* (Heidegger)—correlative to the investigation of constitution and that this turning-back is not only a movement of thought but a movement of thought that corresponds in its essence to the historical, epochal, moment of its discovery. Thus, the unbuilding of Canada which is discussed here is a moment at which the turning-back of thought is demanded. It is this unbuilding that has forced me in this essay to back up from

---

the discourse of the cultural identity of English Canada to first address what I have called my “two words.”

<sup>6</sup> Heidegger’s early work did not distinguish in this manner between fate and destiny. It distinguished them only through the collective nature of destiny versus individual fates. “Destiny is not composed of individual fates, nor can being-with-one-another be conceived as the mutual occurrence of several subjects” (Heidegger 1996, 352). Destiny thus referred to the authentic temporality of a people. However, Heidegger later distinguished further, suggesting that “fate means the inevitableness of an unalterable course,” whereas “We shall call that sending-that-gathers which first starts man upon a way of revealing, *destining*” (Heidegger 1997, 25, 24). Starting on a *way* of revealing is not only not inevitable but also not the only way possible. The starting starts from a revealing which interprets the course as a way. Thus, destiny as the sending-that-gathers is a collective project that interprets the past and projects a possible future.

<sup>7</sup> Leroux’ argument, however, pertains exclusively to the discipline of sociology in Quebec. My argument shows that no such coherence could be found within a discipline in English Canada, but only in the intellectual formation as a whole.

<sup>8</sup> There are two other theses, which are secondary in this context, that pertain to *writing about* this historical cultural formation and not directly to the formation itself. While I do not want to argue for some great divide between a historical formation and its self-awareness as registered in traditions of writing, such a distinction, which roughly divides the social sciences from the humanities, is a useful pragmatic one as a starting-point for the account of a discourse (Frye 1971; Armour and Trott 1981).

<sup>9</sup> This point trespasses on the larger question of what sort of analytical and interpretive features are justifiable in sociology. Without entering that debate here, I want to suggest only

---

that this ‘reduction to empirical fact’ away from ‘political,’ and thus ethical, features is a constant tendency in sociology. I do not mean this remark to support that tendency but only to highlight it.

<sup>10</sup> It must be said that English Canadian Left-nationalism, when it posed directly the question of Québec, tended to accept the argument that Québec was a separate nation. Nonetheless, the question of Québec was not central for its formulation of its own project and thus was not a defining issue. In this sense, left-nationalism was a transitional moment within English Canada with regard to its attitude to Québec. The sense of betrayal expressed by Left-nationalists when the vote in Québec carried the day for the Free Trade Agreement signifies a historical moment at which left-nationalism in English Canada and the sovereigntist movement in Québec parted company—or, whatever company Left-nationalists had imagined they kept—thus effectively dividing the ‘Canadian’ left and keeping it from having any force in Ottawa. The historical impact of this moment can hardly be overestimated (Resnisk, with a reply by Daniel Latouche 1990).

<sup>11</sup> Will Kymlicka’s work is the most public index of this shift (Kymlicka 1996). However, the analysis of this essay shows that the field should be conceptualized as a ‘proliferation’ and not, as in Kymlicka’s work, as a quasi-natural list of three identities. The exclusion of Louis Riel and the Métis from this list indicates that the process of proliferation is hardly complete and cannot be arbitrarily halted in a manner that could only be ‘justified’ by state power. For this reason, I refer to his work only as an ‘index’ of the change in question.